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Western academics warn against 'Cold War' attitude on China

Deteriorating political climate causing self-censorship, conference hears

November 8, 2021

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Academics have warned over the consequences of a renewed Cold War mentality affecting research and education ties between China and the West.



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Increasingly, Western scholars are facing pressure to take a critical standpoint on China, participants in a conference hosted by Utrecht University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/utrecht-university>) heard.

"One of the debates in our network and also here today is this challenge of how to avoid being caught up in this polarised debate – so how do you present your research or your findings or your questions without being [framed] as either anti- or pro-China," said Nana de Graaff, associate professor in international relations at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/vrije-universiteit-amsterdam>) and chair of the European Union-funded China in Europe Research Network.

Dr de Graaff said that Europe and the US hold a false "sense of superiority" when they ignore the East, and put themselves at peril of losing touch with a growing research superpower.

"The world will become increasingly unknown to us" if the West fails to engage with China and other parts of the world, she warned.

Xiaoyong Zhang, China coordinator at Wageningen University & Research, said that there was already pressure to justify research ties with colleagues in China. A few years ago, she and her colleagues faced repeated questions over a collaboration with Chinese academics, including over human rights, she said.

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She put it down to the increasingly politicised public discourse on China relations trickling into campuses. Dr Zhang said that, try as academics do to stay above political turmoil, “societal debate also has [an] impact on us”.

Dr Zhang said that many researchers had begun to ask themselves, “Do I need to be engaged in this programme on China?”, and whether their engagement would cause negative consequences. She noted a chilling trend in Western academia.

“Self-censorship is not from China. It’s from here...from colleagues, from friends. That really worries me,” she said.

Dr Zhang’s story was not the only account of creeping influence of divisive rhetoric on academia. Ágota Révész, an associate professor at the Technical University of Berlin (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/technical-university-berlin>), said that recently, when she lectured on China, her students had started to react with suspicion.

“I start talking about China and I can feel this oomph, this pushback, and I have real fears that I [could] lose my credibility in the classroom,” she said.

Dr Révész attributed the situation to growing political tension. “I’ve been working on this for 30 years and I have never experienced such an amount of fear,” she said of the current climate.

Simon Marginson, professor of international higher education at the University of Oxford (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-oxford>), said institutions should seek to head off the situation before it resulted in a freezing of international collaborations between China and the West.

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“The norm should be openness rather than the other way around,” he said, adding that the current political stance “goes back to the old...Cold War atmosphere”.

"The essential thing that will decide whether this US-China world is a Cold War world will be whether openness and exchange remains normal or whether it becomes exceptional and rare," he said.

Scholars' only option is to forge ahead and continue to share their knowledge, said Dr Révész.

"The biggest fear is our fear of the unknown...so you need to break it down and make it known somehow."

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